



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Successful executives often cite hardships and the lessons learned by grappling with failure as their most significant learning events. But our success-oriented culture demands immediate achievement: We are trained to keep our fears and inner struggles to ourselves. When these interior dynamics are unexamined or kept silent, people, performance, and organizational culture suffer.

BY DANIEL HOLDEN

The Forgotten Self:

Executive Development for the 21st Century

I have worked in executive leadership development for more than 25 years and currently serve as an executive coach for the University of Notre Dame's Executive M.B.A. program. I see that our old ways of growing leaders are not enough to prepare us for the complexity, terror, uncertainty, and excitement of the days we are in. In our rush to drive results we easily forget that it is the inner life of leaders where meaning is made and strategies formed to innovate and compete in the marketplace. While many of these strategies are conscious and open to discussion, many are not. These unconscious strategies thwart executive development and, in the end, organizational performance. This article discusses four traps or errors in our thinking about executive development and suggests straightforward antidotes that immediately improve the way we develop new leaders.

High-potential leaders are typically culled from the ranks of those with technical mastery in their respective disciplines. We take our best engineers and financial managers, our best sales and marketing people, our best corporate lawyers and throw them into the leadership soup. We may send them away for training in new technical areas or pass them through a rotation of brief assignments in key areas to expand the breadth and scope of their knowledge. We develop minds to comprehend what's out there and frequently overlook the heart and soul.

Performance assessments focus on short-term measurable results. People who continue to deliver are promoted while those who struggle can fall out of favor quickly. A success-oriented culture demands immediate achievement and doesn't know what to do with hardship and struggle, doubt and fear. These deeper issues of the heart and soul of the leader often go unrecognized even though real transformation — a change in thinking — often lies just on the other

side of what we fear. When successful executives are asked about their most significant learning events, they often speak of hardship and the lessons learned by grappling with disappointment and loss. We lose sight of this in our development efforts.

We are trained to keep our fears and inner struggles to ourselves. ("Never let them see you sweat.") Such ragged emotional and spiritual issues deepen both our leadership and our humanity, impacting followers long after our tenure as leaders is over. When these interior dynamics are unexamined or kept silent, people, performance, and organizational culture suffer.

Consider the story of the new flute from 12th century Japan, as related in Stephen Nachmanovitch's book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*.

The new flute

A new flute was invented in China. A Japanese master musician discovered the subtle beauties of its tone and brought it home, where he gave concerts all around the country. One evening he played with a community of musicians and music lovers who lived in a certain town. At the end of the concert, his name was called. He took out the new flute and played one piece. When he was finished, there was silence in the room. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

The next day, as this master was packing to leave, the musicians approached him and asked how long it would take a skilled player to learn the new flute. "Years," he said. They asked if he would take a pupil, and he agreed. After he left, they decided among themselves to send a young man, a brilliantly talented flautist, sensitive to beauty, diligent, and trustworthy. They gave him money for his living expenses and for the master's tuition and sent him on his way to the capital, where the master lived.

Trap 1: Seizing shortcuts to real

Peers predict executive success

A simple and effective way to predict executive success is to ask colleagues on the managerial track. So says industrial-organizational psychologist Allen Kraut, who specializes in organizational development.

"People who work with each other day in and day out know who among their ranks is likely to advance to corporate leadership," says Kraut. "Colleagues see a different side of each other than management often sees. They know how good a person really is. And the reverse is true: They know when someone is not executive potential."

Kraut likens the process to identifying minor league baseball players who not only have the potential to play in the majors but also to become Hall of Famers. "Ask any kid on a team who the best players are and they will be close to total agreement. They know because they see each other perform on a regular basis," he points out.

For the past 25 years, Kraut, a professor of management at Baruch College in New York City, has been studying the career paths of middle management executives at a Fortune 100 firm.

mastery, underestimating the real costs. This journey begins with our young musician attending a concert where he is touched by the music and sees his own calling as he listens to and experiences the master. But how long will it take? An early warning sign of flawed desire is an urgency to cut short the real work of mastery. I have been asked this kind of question a thousand times: How long will the coaching take? How many days for the training? Can we do it in less time? The honest answer is that it will take longer than we think because real development is not technical but a much deeper process. A subterranean current runs through our lives and slowly carves our contributions and talents out of us. We control only a small aspect of it. We learn to develop our strengths as well as cultivate a

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relationship with our vulnerabilities—the latter work we quite naturally resist. Our primary work, often overlooked, is understanding and moving through our resistance.

A parallel exists with many senior leaders who see their role as only sponsoring the change initiatives before their organizations. They seldom choose to embody the change themselves. Strategies to build customer awareness and innovation while streamlining product delivery are part of the landscape in many organizations. Culture change, interdepartmental partnerships and involvement, workflow redesign and cost reduction efforts, diversity, managing change, and transition will test a leader's capacity to wade through confusion and resistance in order to learn, internalize, and execute new models and frameworks. This takes time.

The student arrived and was accepted by his teacher, who assigned him a single, simple tune. At first, he received systematic instruction, but he easily mastered all the technical problems. Now he arrived for his daily lesson, sat down, and played his tune — and all the master could say was, “Something lacking.” The student exerted himself in every possible way. He practiced for endless hours; yet, day after day, week after week, all the master said was, “Something lacking.”

Trap 2: Overemphasizing technical competence. The young musicians assess whom to send, and they choose a man with the right technical talent and sensitivity to beauty. Early in the journey of leadership development we have to learn to embrace the undercurrent of fear of falling short. Fear often shows up when our technical competence fails us. Clinging only to what we know how to do adds to our suffering. Real vision requires us to do things we've never done before. We don't know if what we want is possible. Our senior leaders question us. Our boards

demand timetables and guarantees. We can derail under the real or imagined threat that important people will look at our work and wag their heads in disappointment — “Something lacking.”

Real vision can evoke real excitement as well as real fear. When fear goes unrecognized, as it often does, it can freeze us into over reliance on technical competence to force results that will not happen. We stick to our financial skills, project management abilities, engineering models, and information technology processes while failing to sharpen the new leadership stance that would serve the organization. We lose our nimbleness and become fixed and solidified. We play to avoid losing rather than playing full out to win. Our young flautist doesn't see this dynamic.

He begged the master to change the tune, but the master said no. The daily playing, the daily “something lacking,” continued for months on end. The student's hope of success and fear of failure became ever magnified, and he swung from agitation to despondency.

Trap 3. Ignoring inner mindsets and assumptions. The story deepens. Technical mastery quickly ends and gives way to approval seeking and pleasing others. The need for perfection begins to strangle our young musician. The student's need for success becomes stronger. This is a telltale sign that the unexamined fear and the assumptions that drive it have grown stronger, not weaker. An urgent, overwhelming desire for something is now coupled with the fear of falling short. It is not a pleasant spot.

Most organizations have a set of leadership competencies and test against these with various 360-degree assessments, peer reviews, and customer feedback. We seldom look more deeply at the assumptions that drive our behavior, the mental operating system that supports our behavior. We ask leaders to change aspects

of their behavior (“Delegate more effectively”) without looking at the assumptions that drive the old behavior (“If I want this job done perfectly, then I must do it myself”). No wonder we revert to the old way so quickly.

There are three mindsets that consistently limit leaders with whom I work. I recognize them in part because I struggle with them myself and also because they are each well-researched and documented:

Real vision requires us to do things we've never done before.

- **Excessive control.** This strategy for reacting to unrecognized fear or anxiety can manifest as a need for perfection, an exaggerated driven stance or heightened ambition. The tendency to adopt an autocratic style when greater involvement is actually called for is a lead indicator. We're trying to prove something to someone, and the only barometer of success is a perfect score or a pile of achievements or acquisitions that continues to grow. There is a secret inner assumption that we don't measure up, and excessive control is the compensatory strategy to keep us feeling worthwhile, valuable, and secure. It seldom does for long. Our flautist, without awareness or skill in his interior wilderness, has become lost.
- **Excessive aloofness and criticalness.** With this strategy we attempt to stay on top by knowing more than others and using our perception of being smarter and more intelligent to critique and diminish the contributions of others so as to secure firm footing ourselves. This is largely a cerebral kingdom, and the distance that needs to be kept from “lesser” others is a core part of the strategy. We don't see ourselves as part of the culture or operations we criticize. To admit to not knowing is to invite catastrophe. In extreme cases, people simply cannot be found: They bury themselves in laboratories or behind closed doors and lob their decisions

from afar. We will see some of this in our frustrated musician.

- **Excessive approval seeking.** If we hold an inner assumption that our true value and worth lies in the hands of others, then it stands that we will do what we can to manage how others see us. We avoid conflict and have trouble telling the truth if important others may be upset by it. We manage ourselves so as to remain in the club and avoid behaviors that could get us thrown out. We say yes when we mean no and then quietly sabotage the work we said yes to. The mere act of coming to work can be an endless game of walking on eggshells. We don't learn to contend for what matters to us. The candor required on elite teams is missing. You might be surprised to find that even the toughest sounding leaders can struggle with approval seeking.

Those of us who get stuck in this game mistake what we do for who we are. The moment we associate our sense of self, our worth, our security with external conditions, we sentence ourselves to a roller coaster experience in which we never quite catch up because the operating assumptions lie outside of our awareness. The organizations we lead stop learning to adapt because of the prevailing fear that exists. We may well achieve a level of excellence in our leadership results for a period of time, sometimes years. Until light shines on the inner assumptions, we miss higher, more elegant levels of mastery where we could achieve even more with much less effort and strain. Transformation happens when leaders see their own mental software.

Trap 4. Rewarding only external achievements while overlooking hardship and inner struggle.

The intensity of the student's journey has grown much stronger and he seemingly breaks down. There are acceptable feelings in the leader-

ship development path, ones that are deemed appropriate to experience and act on. These include anger, frustration, impatience, pride and confidence. Our student, however, experiences feelings that are at the heart of real mastery but seldom allowed voice in our leadership programs, let alone in our organizations — confusion, shame, and fear. He wants to disappear from his original calling.

Finally, the frustration became too much for him. One night, he packed his bag and slinked out. He continued to live in the capital city for some time longer until his money ran dry. He began drinking. Finally, impoverished, he drifted back to his own part of the country. Ashamed to show his face to his former colleagues, he found a hut far out in the countryside. He still possessed his flutes, still played, but found no new inspiration in music. Passing farmers heard him play and sent their children to him for beginner's lessons. He lived this way for years.

In our own journey, there may well be a place where our original vision is lost or becomes too heavy a burden for us to carry. Plant closings, mergers and acquisitions come to mind. Demotions or jobs lost altogether. I think of a recent conversation with a former president of an acquired company who spoke of being afraid to return to a city and walk through the building that housed thousands of people he led for years. "It would be too much to bear," he told me.

We turn away from pain hoping to escape. We dream of taking new positions in other organizations where the way is easier. We begin living fully outside of the organization and mistake this for work-life balance. Our great gifts are still hidden within, dormant, simmering until another time. Our young flautist continues to play but finds no inspiration. When we play only for someone else or do what others would do, we too become

dead inside. How do your emerging leaders wrestle with these issues? Do you encourage them to play it too safe to know these issues at all?

One of the most significant transitions leaders must attempt is losing the desire to please and be respected by those around and above us. We may develop many competencies and a solid track record of success along the way, but to the extent that we assign final approval of ourselves to others, we're essentially playing to avoid losing their respect. Not many will conceptually disagree with these words. In the heat of organizational life, however, choosing to fully engage with no fear of winning or losing anything (including the 401(k) and this year's incentive bonus) is an emotionally demanding journey few undertake. There is a level of genuinely inspired performance on the other side of this threshold that awaits those who venture into the inner water of change. The executive development conversation needs to include these experiences.

One morning, there was a knock on his door. It was the oldest past master from his town along with the youngest student. They told him that tonight they were going to have a concert and they had all decided it would not take place without him. With some effort, they overcame his objections. Almost in a trance, he picked up a flute and went with them.

I periodically ask leaders to reflect on difficult transitions they have successfully navigated. I invite them to focus on the toughest part of these times. Then I ask what it was that finally helped them turn the corner. Although the answers vary, the common themes have to do with faith and fortuitous circumstances falling into place. We can believe all we want that we run our lives but tough times teach us that there are other forces at play. Hardship gets our attention.

The concert began. As he waited

Honesty lacking in the workplace

When people bemoan the lack of corporate honesty, images of Enron can quickly come to mind. But honesty has a significant impact on virtually every workplace in America, according to consultant Steven Gaffney. He contends that honesty equates to simple, straightforward communication. And that, he says, is in short supply.

“Honesty in the workplace is not just about truth or lies,” Gaffney notes. “Those issues get the headlines. But the more prevalent problem in business is the lack of open, honest communication between co-workers and on every organizational level. This predictable pattern of less-than-straightforward communication costs organizations billions of dollars from poor decisions, internal conflict, lost productivity, poor employee retention, and wasted time dealing with internal problems when they should be focusing on their business.”

Gaffney, author of the book *Honesty Works!*, says his research has repeatedly shown that the core of most work-related problems can be traced back to the lack of straightforward communications. One of the most prevalent issues he sees in working with corporate clients, he says, is what he calls “the lies of withholding.”

“Whenever someone avoids a festering issue with a co-worker, tells a supervisor only the good news, remains silent when they disagree with a proposed initiative, becomes a yes man with superiors to curry favor, or complains to someone other than the person they have an issue with, they are being dishonest.”

behind the stage, no one intruded on his inner silence. Finally, at the end of the concert, his name was called. He stepped out onto his stage in his rags. He looked down at his hands and saw he had chosen the new flute. Now he realized that he had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. He sat down and played the same tune he had played so many times for his teacher in the past. When he finished, there was silence for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard, speaking softly from the back of the room: “Like a god!”

An extraordinary moment that he could not see from his vantage point unfolds. A dream he no longer grasped — yet still held loosely — opens before his eyes. What was offered once in grief and desperation is received back. All of the anguish,

the long nights howling to an empty sky, the lost friends, the desperate prayers, the self-doubt that crept into him are suddenly lifted. Stripped now of his need for approval and instant perfection, with nothing to win or lose, he is able to play his simple, single tune “like a god.” In organizational cultures (as well as our larger national context) where winning and losing are held as core values, we have much to learn about the deeper work of cultivating the mindset of self-mastery required of leaders.

This aspect of the leader’s path to mastery is not pretty or wrapped in nice paper and ribbons. If our leadership candidates made public these experiences, we’d conclude they did not have what it takes to advance. Do we have the courage and skill to wade into this conversation with

ourselves and others?

Implications

The path to executive development passes directly through the self, which we often forget. Coursework, academic credentials, and rotational job experiences in many functional areas are all good and perhaps necessary, but if no work is done on the mindset of leaders, all of the additional experiences amount to nothing. Heightened levels of achievement are only a byproduct of this inward change in perspective. Mastery has to do with learning how to offer our simple tune to the world fully and authentically. This simple task can cost us everything. Yet when we ignore or fight with our shortcomings we get in our own way and undercut our own development as leaders and creators. Leaders and those responsible for developing leaders would do well to consider the lessons from our young flautist:

- **Make executive development a business imperative.** Real development is more than just a sequence of jobs accomplished. It is more than a step approach in assignments that requires people to work harder and longer. It unfolds over an extended period of time and requires substantive dialogue about the self of leaders. Don’t persist in looking for short cuts because each one you find will cost you down the road.
- **Focus on the inner operating assumptions as well as external results.** Explore leaders’ emotional depth. Find out what role hardship has played in their leadership and life. Inquire about how they engage others who struggle. We unconsciously reduce our doubts and fears by not taking risks. In what ways do your leaders attempt to compensate for fear they refuse to acknowledge? Virtually every executive I have worked with struggles with fear. What awareness

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do your young leaders have of their own inner strategies for reacting to discomfort? Breakthrough levels of performance are just on the other side of fear. Keep this idea in your line of sight.

- **Emphasize team relationship skills and achievement.** Both are better predictors of leadership performance than technical mastery. Real achievement is more than activity: It is purposeful and focused. It requires dialogue to build alignment. This is not the squishy psychobabble you fear but the candid, courageous ability to raise difficult performance issues and see them through to resolution in ways that strengthen both outcomes and relationships. Some organizations practically deify technical knowledge as the ticket into middle to senior leadership

roles. There is no research to support this, and my own experience as a consultant and executive coach suggests these organizations pay a long-term price for this strategy. There is a better way.

- **Model openness to the emotional component of leadership.** Leadership is far more emotional than we let on. We will be brought to the end of the rope many times and not immediately know what to do. Let both the joy of achievement and the embarrassment of error and confusion — and all the ground in between — be part of your leadership conversation. No more positive spins, no more posturing to look brilliant. No more thinking of those who struggle as weak.
- **Bring spirituality into the leadership conversation.** We hunger to know who and what we are.

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We hope for the resilience and strength to hang in during tough transitions. Within each of us is a grounded place of rest, a sacred center where the answers to our challenges reside. How do your young leaders make meaning out of their experience? Ask about their experience and strategies when they're at their wit's end. To what extent do they acknowledge their own accountability as well as the need to look beyond themselves to a larger power? All development is hastened when spirituality is included in the conversation.

Teach people how to look fearlessly at their lives, work, and leadership so as to tease out the simple tune that is theirs alone to embody. Our organizations and world need this kind of development to take place. Who better to do it than you? ❖



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